

## Sparks Flew Over the Fire House

By TONY KELSO

The Bluefish River Firehouse, built in 1906 and moved in 1908, is a diminutive building, yet its history is not small, and record books from the fire engineers, shed light on how the road to organized firefighting in Duxbury was not always a smooth one.

Henry Henderson created the Engine House #1 plans in March 1906. We don't know anything about Henry Henderson, but he must have at least known how to draft plans, although how well is an open question considering later problems. J. Dexter Randall of West



Duxbury built the engine house for \$742 in October 1908. Problems in the design of the building began almost immediately. The water tower had to be relocated on the building. A water supply had to

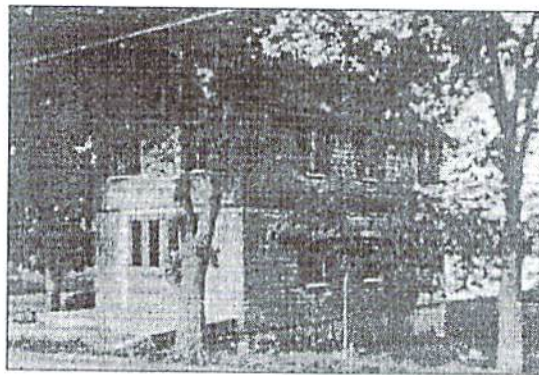
be available because this was before town water was created in 1914. The engine house itself had to be lowered for some reason, so that new posts that supported the building underneath were only six inches high. Another telling fact was that a year later when the original Hall's Corner fire station was being built, the doors for that firehouse were specified to be wider and higher than the ones on Engine House #1. Then in 1911, three years after it was moved to Bluefish River, the doors and ramp on Engine House #1 were also re-built.

Engine House #1 was built to house one of the town's two fire engine tubs. Engine #1 is still owned by the Duxbury Fire Department and housed in the antique apparatus building behind the Central Fire Station on Tremont Street. Unfortunately, even the original engine seems to have been a snug fit, since the records of 1911 show a wish to find a way to lengthen the engine house.



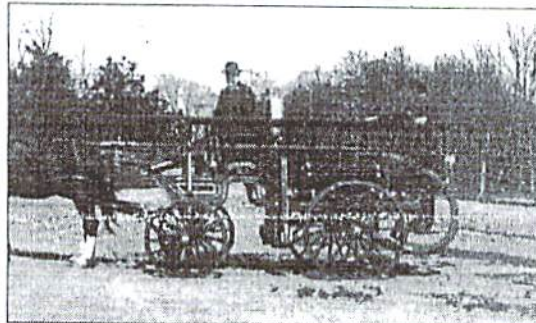
Engine House #1 in 2005.

*Photo courtesy of Duxbury Fire Dept.*



Engine House #1 after its move to the Bluefish River in 1908.

*Photo courtesy of DR&HS*



Engine Tub #1 pulled by "Bess" with Frederick Knapp, a Fire Engineer, at the reins, and "Hot" Merry on the rear.

*Photo courtesy of DR&HS*



Engine Tub #1 was pulled by a horse. When Engine House #1 stood on St. George Street, MacNaught's livery stable across the street was owned by the first fire captain of #1, James MacNaught, and he supplied the horses. Once the Engine House was moved to the Bluefish River, Brigg's stable, which was across the river near the Drew house, supplied the needed horses.

By 1916 changes in transportation affected even little Engine House #1. Brigg's stable moved and it was "a serious handicap" to get the needed horses. Engine Tub #1 then had to be towed to a fire by a motor truck, not an ideal situation when minutes counted in fighting fires. A "motor driven apparatus" was bought in 1917; a fire truck from American LaFrance Fire Engine Company, described as a Ford chassis with two chemical tanks mounted on it and a trailer to carry everything else. In 1924 a new Brockway fire engine was squeezed into Engine House #1, and the "little chemical engine" as it was called, was moved to the North Duxbury station. It is interesting to note that another technological innovation, the telephone, greatly aided the early warning of fires. Duxbury telephone operators were constantly praised for using "their minds as well as their fingers" during fire emergencies.

Even the original location of Engine House #1, behind the wooden library on St. George Street, was subject to major controversy soon after it was built. Horace Freeman, who lived two houses away from the engine house, headed the remonstrance of 20 voters against the location. They felt the location was poor and too far off the road. A town landing was suggested but the fire engineers felt this was not good business sense to locate the building on land not owned by the town. By November 1906 a special town meeting was called and was dominated by the group that wanted the

engine house moved. The fire engineers felt the vote might not be a legal one, since the issue was not on the warrant and sought the legal advice of the town attorney (the first mention of such a counsel). Whether it was the town counsel's advice or two other aspects of small town politics that were the deciding factors, the records don't show.

When a new captain for Company #1 was elected, he was Hortence "Hot" Merry, who happened to live on the hill above the Bluefish River. Having a captain near his firehouse was a helpful factor. "Hot" Merry later became fire chief for the whole town.

Also, the influential and wealthy Wright family, who gave the extra land behind the library for the engine house, changed their minds. It is interesting that in 1906 Georgianna Wright's oldest son John Wright died at age 45, and it was likely his death that crystallized her idea to build a substantial library building dedicated to the deceased members of her family that now included her two sons John and George, her husband George and her daughter Florence. In December 1907 with the Wright Building construction begun, William Wright asked the town to move Engine House #1 to a new location. The Bluefish River town landing was bought and the engine house moved in March 1908, where it served as an active firehouse until 1965. Engine House #1, despite its humble and rocky beginnings, pluckily served Duxbury for almost 60 years in an increasingly sophisticated world of fire fighting.

The Friends of Bluefish River Fire House have started fundraising efforts to restore Engine House #1. Donations may be sent to: Friends of the Bluefish River Fire House, P.O. Box 1180 Duxbury, MA 02331.